

OP-EDS

ZOMBIE ISMS OF THE PROTECTIONISTS

NOVEMBER 1, 2023 | JOEL SCHLOSBERG | 1 COMMENT



Made in America: an iconic Spanish one-liner delivered by an Austrian action hero, filmed by an Israeli cinematographer for a Canadian director. Photo by Joel Schlosberg. [CC0 License](#).

Ghouls and vampires weren't the only things refusing to die at the end of October. Oren Cass disinterred centuries-old economic fallacies in "[Why Trump Is Right About Tariffs](#)" (*The Wall Street Journal*, October 27).

It has been over a century and a half since the American Free-Trade League imported the words of Frederic Bastiat across the Atlantic "to convince the people of the United States of the folly and wrongfulness of the Protective system" in an edition of the book they titled [Sophisms of the Protectionists](#) (better and more simply known as *Economic Sophisms*). And pundits have had six decades to learn from Murray Rothbard's [observation](#) that a clear look at the notion "that exports should be encouraged by the government and imports discouraged" reveals it to be "a tissue of fallacy; for what is the point of exports if not to purchase imports?"

Yet Cass blithely asserts that “domestic production has value to a nation, so a tariff that gives it preferential treatment can be sensible and even, to use the economist’s favored term, efficient.”

If they indeed provided consumers with better goods, “preferential treatment” would be exactly what American suppliers didn’t need to stay competitive. As James Bovard has [explained](#), “Australia is among the world’s most efficient sugar, beef, and dairy producers” — all of which were omitted from the scope of George W. Bush’s United States-Australia Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act (AUFTA), while “in return, the United States agreed to exempt the Australian pharmaceutical industry and film industry from vigorous American competition.”

AUFTA was inspired by Bill Clinton’s North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which in turn drew on earlier trade policy; as Rothbard noted in 1993’s [“The NAFTA Myth,”](#) they “have converted an unfortunate [George W.’s father George H.W.] Bush treaty into a horror of international statism.” Proto-Trumpist restrictions on free trade under the guise of Free Trade acronyms also gives the lie to Cass’s claim that “the school of thought that dismisses the case for tariffs is also a school that dismisses the possibility of the world in which we live.”

If we *did* live in a world of free trade, the “complex supply chains” that Cass wants to keep within American shores to support “building and repairing billion-dollar warships” would be replaced, not by the “sailcloth and gunpowder” Cass suggests were enough to satisfy Adam Smith’s exception to free trade for essential military goods in the eighteenth century, but by a twenty-first century update of Bastiat’s proposed replacement of armadas “vomiting fire, death, and desolation over our cities” by the “merchant vessel, which comes to offer in free and peaceable exchange, produce for produce.”

New Yorker Joel Schlosberg is a senior news analyst at The William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism.

PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY

1. [“Zombie Isms of the Protectionists”](#) by Joel Schlosberg, *Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman* [Wasilla, Alaska], November 9, 2023